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SUBJECT: THE ISRAELI ARAB COMMUNITY AND THE 2009 ELECTIONS

11. (SBU) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Arab parliamentarians and civil society activists told an audience of diplomatic representatives that an increasing sense of alienation among Arab Israelis would likely lead to an all-time low voter turnout for the February 10 general elections. Factors contributing to the expected low turnout include negative Arab reaction to the war in Gaza; perceived media and GOI incitement against Arabs; political, social, and economic inequality between Arabs and Jews; and the increasing popularity of what participants label as the "fascist" Yisrael Beiteinu Party (YBP) - a party that attempted (unsuccessfully) to bar two Arab parties from the upcoming elections and that has attracted considerable appeal among Jewish voters who agree with the party's slogan: "without loyalty, there is no citizenship." While the participants at the Mossawa NGO colloquy empathized with the recent calls for an Arab Israeli boycott of the elections, they unanimously rejected the idea as counterproductive. While the Arab community's alarm at Yisrael Beiteinu's rising popularity is understandable, Israeli Arab leaders often fail to recognize how their own public rhetoric -- which often draws rhetorical parallels between Nazi Germany and contemporary Israel -- contributes to the success of Lieberman's jingoistic message. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

THE IMPACT OF GAZA ON THE ARAB VOTE

12. (U) The Arab NGO Mossawa ("Equality" in Arabic) invited diplomats to hear the views of Arab Knesset members and civil society leaders from the Arab community in Israel on the eve of elections. The NGO and its invitees are representative of the assertive, nationalist voices of many, but not all, Arab citizens of Israel, many of whom prefer to call themselves Palestinians living in Israel or "the Arabs of 1948." The panelists cited the recent Israeli military offensive in Gaza as a major factor leading to the various calls for Arab Israelis to boycott the February 10 elections. United Arab List MK Ibrahim Sarsour alleged that "the crisis in Gaza and in all the occupied territories showed that the actions of Israel are despicable; they are war crimes and state terrorism." Haifa University Professor of Psychology Ramzi Suleiman, who has long been involved in Jewish-Arab coexistence programs, admitted that the situation in Gaza has made him lose hope: "It was a massacre and it was state terror," he argued. Mossawa Center Director Jafar Farah complained about what he saw as the disproportionate use of police force at demonstrations against the war in Arab-Israeli communities. Aida Touma-Suleiman of the Arab-Jewish (formerly Communist) Hadash Party said "We thought we had the right to protest against this war," lamenting the 700 arrests and dozens of indictments that resulted from such protests. (Comment: It is not clear to us to know many of these protestors were arrested for offenses such as blocking traffic or throwing stones at motorists, activities which the police said were common. End Comment.)

INCITEMENT AND THE YISRAEL BEITENU EFFECT

13. (U) In addition to the war in Gaza, panelists cited what they saw as increasing incitement against Arab Israelis within mainstream Jewish society as another contributing factor in the calls for an election boycott. Farah alleged incitement in the Israeli media against Arabs, pointing to what he claimed were 168 incidents of media incitement against the Arab community in 2008. Farah

presented examples of political and media incitement that included Yisrael Beiteinu leader Avigdor Lieberman's veiled call in 2006 for the execution of Arab Balad MKs who have visited Syria by stating "the fate of the collaborators in the Knesset should be identical to that of the Nazi collaborators." Farah also noted that in January, MK Arie Elad of the far-right Ha'Tikva party was photographed with a snake and was quoted as saying that after working with the Arabs in the Knesset he is not afraid to handle snakes.

14. (U) MK Ahmed Tibi (United Arab List) complained about the political environment in Israel and compared Avigdor Lieberman, the founder of the Yisrael Beiteinu, to France's Jean-Marie Le Pen and Austria's Jorg Haider. Tibi did not understand why the international community does not express its disdain for Lieberman like it did for Le Pen and Haider. Tibi called upon the international community to protest "fascist" parties in Israel and to refuse to meet with Lieberman as a government official. Lieberman, for his part, credits Tibi for a portion of Yisrael Beiteinu's popularity among Jewish voters.

15. (U) Touma-Suleiman noted that Arab Israelis also feel threatened by the Israeli security services, arguing that "there is an offensive attack against Arabs by the Israel Security Agency (ISA) and the police, and there is an increase in attacks against Arabs in Israel." Several speakers referred anecdotally to campaigns from Jewish communities and political parties to boycott Arab businesses. In the Second Intifada this happened in Nazareth, and in October 2008 this occurred again in Akko. Farah maintained that the boycott persists in Akko and Haifa.

16. (U) According to participants, the litany of frustrations suffered by Arab-Israelis has led to disillusionment with the

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political process in Israel and a pervasive sense that voting is not worth the effort. MK Tibi cautioned, however, that such tendencies were counter-productive, arguing that only in elections is there full equality with "one man, one vote." "We as Arabs shoot ourselves in the foot if we discourage voting," he said. Farah agreed, but noted that "elections do not mean genuine democracy." Farah also stressed that the Knesset's Central Election Commission's attempt in January to ban some Arab parties from the Knesset (which was subsequently overruled by the High Court) is the third time that such an effort has been attempted. This implies a political de-legitimization of Arab parties, he said, and the Arab community does not want to continue being rescued by the High Court. Like Tibi, Farah stressed that while the inclination to boycott the elections was understandable, the Arab public must remain engaged in the political process in order to work toward full equality for the Arab minority. Farah thought the boycott attempts would fail, but still expected Arab turnout on February 10 not to exceed 43 percent.

17. (SBU) Comment: While the Arab community's alarm at Yisrael Beiteinu's rising popularity is understandable, Israeli Arab leaders often fail to recognize how their own public rhetoric -- which often draws rhetorical parallels between Nazi Germany and contemporary Israel -- contributes to the success of Lieberman's jingoistic message. Many Jewish Israelis suspect their Arab compatriots of being more loyal to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and even to Hizballah in Lebanon, than to Israel. Jewish Israelis also resent the refusal to perform national service (military or civilian) and widespread tax evasion among the majority of Arab Israelis, and perceive them as being ungrateful and hypocritical for enjoying the benefits of citizenship in the region's only developed democracy while refusing to contribute their share. Against such a backdrop, Yisrael Beiteinu's campaign slogan -- "without loyalty, there is no citizenship" -- has been met with widespread applause in Jewish Israeli society, particularly in the wake of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza and Arab protest against it. As prominent commentator Yossi Klein Halevy said this week, Yisrael Beiteinu is "riding an ugly wave of (anti-Arab) resentment among Jewish Israelis."

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